GLOWAC+HARRIS+MADISON

# MEET THE MEDIA



## I. INTRODUCTION

Ambivalence toward the media is practically a national characteristic. Yet we still depend on our morning newspaper for our dose of daily news. Regardless of the context of the story, however, responding to the media can be intimating. Reporters can be highly skilled at interviewing – and their resulting stories can wield tremendous influence.

This guide is intended to raise your comfort level in dealing with the media, to demystify the process and to give you some tips in responding to various media inquiries and reporters' interviewing tactics. In other words, our goal is for you to open your morning paper with enthusiasm – even when you know your name is going to be in it.

## II. RULES FOR SUCCESS

Several key points will be emphasized throughout this guide. Remember them, if nothing else.

**Know what the interview is about.**
Don't go into an interview cold. Find out why a reporter is calling, give yourself time to prepare, then call back.

**Have a message.**
Once you know the subject of the interview, prepare three to five key points you want to make.

**An interview is not a conversation.**
The media are your conduit to the public. Speak to the public, not the reporter. Be friendly, but remember that interviews are how reporters conduct business.

**There's no such thing as off the record.**
An "off the record" comment may not be attributed to you, but that doesn't mean it won't appear in the paper or be used to confirm information.

**Keep it simple.**
Nothing ruins an interview faster than long, complex explanations. If you want your message conveyed, be sure to say it simply.

**Be brief.**
Practice answering questions in 20 seconds or less. Chances are, the reporter will use the first decent 20-second comment and skip much of the rest.

**Tell the truth.**
Don't lie and don't guess.

## III. WHEN A REPORTER CALLS

**First things first.**
The first thing you have to do is decide whether you will grant the interview. To help you decide, answer the following questions:

- What does the reporter want to talk about?
- Are you the appropriate person to answer questions on this topic?
- What medium does the reporter work for?
- What is the format of the interview? Nightly news? Feature story? Will the interview be taped? Will you be on camera live?
- Where will the interview be conducted? How long will it take?
- What is the reporter's deadline?

Reporters themselves should be able to answer many of these questions for you. Be particularly aware of reporters' deadlines. They have a job to do and editors to please. The deadline may be weeks - or minutes - away. Respect for those deadlines will go a long way in ensuring positive media relations in the future.

**Outline your main points.**
Once you've decided to grant an interview, prepare three to five points to get your message across as briefly as possible – preferably in 20 seconds or less.

Ask yourself these questions:

- What is the issue?
- What is your involvement in the issue?
- Why is it important?
- What is the historical perspective?

Here's a formula you might use in answering questions:

- First Sentence
  Make a statement that answers the reporter's question as briefly as possible.
  "Yes" or "no" often is sufficient. Yes, it is.

- Second Sentence
  Support your answer.

- Third Sentence
  Transition into your message.

- Fourth Sentence
  State your message.

**Gather background information.**
Background materials are helpful to a reporter, particularly if a topic is complex. A press release on a given subject or other information, such as brochures, statistics or historical background can assist in gathering information on a topic.

**Anticipate tough questions and prepare your answers.**
List the ten most difficult questions you might be asked regarding the interview topic and the ten most difficult questions regarding the topic in general. Think about how you will transition from answering these questions into a key point you want to make.

**Rehearse.**
Go over the questions until you are confident you can handle each and every one. Record your answers with a tape recorder. However, don't plan to read your answers during the interview.

**Relax.**
Most interviews are your opportunity to tell the public something interesting about your profession or business. Be personable and confident.

## IV. DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

There are good reporters and bad reporters. Most are concerned with honesty, accuracy, getting the story straight and getting it first. A few are openly biased or flagrantly antagonistic - reporters who try to make you lose your cool and say something you'll regret. All reporters, however, have one primary goal: to get information. Whether they are good or bad, they may use interviewing techniques that are difficult to handle.

**Loaded questions.**
The reporter lists three to five items to build a case and then asks the "loaded" question. Begin by either accepting or countering the statements, then bridge to your message.

Question: "Only X percent of your employees are women. Only X percent are black. A mere X percent are Chicano. Don't you think this displays a history of discriminatory hiring practices?"

Answer: "While your statistics are correct, your conclusion is not. Let's look at the record today. This year, X percent of our hires were women and minorities. The Acme Company is committed to achieving employee diversity."

**Unacceptable alternatives.**
The reporter asks you to choose between one extreme or the other, neither being acceptable.

Question: "Would you rather sacrifice design excellence for research excellence or become a leader in the industry?"

Answer: "Neither extreme is acceptable. At the Acme Company, design and research programs complement each other, and we are committed to excellence in both."

**Hypothetical situation.**
The reporter creates a hypothetical situation and follows up with a specific question. Don't respond to the hypothetical; state your message.

If reporters don't give up, don't try to go back and answer in a manner that will make them happy. You might rephrase your answer, but stick to your message.

**Commenting on others comments.**
Essentially, the reporter is asking you to speak for someone else. Don't do it, especially if you did not hear the individual make the statement yourself. It's possible the person was misquoted.

**Divide and conquer.**
Reporters may want to divide you from your superiors or colleagues by asking, "How would YOU handle this?" If something is out of your area of expertise, say so. Then bridge to your message.

Question: "How would you go about increasing employee diversity?"

Answer: "I am not the one who does the hiring at the Acme Company. But I can tell you it is every department managers' responsibility to create a welcoming environment for all cultures."

**False premises and conclusions.**
Reporters' questions may contain false premises. Respond by countering immediately or a viewer may accept the false premise.

Question: "When are you going to improve employee health benefits?

Answer: "I believe employees are receiving a good benefits package now, and one of the things we are doing to ensure this is..."

Reporters may paraphrase one of your answers to get you to agree to it and then they use only your agreement to the new statement.

Question: "You mean employees didn't used to receive good health benefits?"

Answer: "Let me restate my answer so that there is not misunderstanding. I believe employees..."

**Negative entrapment.**
Never repeat a reporter's negative statements. Reporters often ask questions in a hostile manner. When responding, turn the sentence around and stress the positive. Use your own words; don't repeat a reporter's hostile question filled with buzz words. Remember, they will quote you, not themselves.

Question: "Some workers have told me they get a lousy salary at the Acme Company."

Don't answer: "I don't think the pay is lousy."

Do answer: "I believe students get a very good wage package at the Acme Company." Continue with an example of the wage program.

**Machine gunning.**
The reporter asks a string of questions simultaneously. Let them build a trap. Use body language (your hand) to stop it. Then respond by simply answering the one question which you most want to answer, ignoring the other parts, then bridge to your message.

**Interrupter.**
The reporter interrupts you while you're trying to answer a question. Respond politely, yet firmly: "Let me finish answering your last question first..."

**Embarrassing silence.**
Beware of the reporter who remains silent, encouraging you to ramble on and on. Once you feel you've answered the question, stop. If you continue, you may end up providing them ammunition with which to shoot you. There are several things you can do to fill an embarrassing silence. You can ask, "Do you have any other questions?" You can ask, "Have I answered your question?" or you can just remain silent.

**Set-up.**
If you feel the reporter is setting you up, chances are you're right. Reporters often think they know the answers before they've asked the questions. Let them know that you are the expert.

**Ambush.**
It's not uncommon for reporters to ambush a news source outside their office or home. Respond as if the reporter had called you on the phone. You might ask what the story is about and when they need the information. Tell the reporter when you or someone else will be able to get back to them. You are not obligated to consent to the ambush interview if you are unprepared or the time is inconvenient.

**When asked a question on top of a question.**
Slow down. Patiently answer one question at a time. The reporter often will look rude in these situations.

**When heckled by a questioner.**
Be sensitive to the feel of the interview. You may want to answer a question very briefly or be silent while the reporter continues. Keep your cool.

**When asked a tough question.**
Avoid such platitudes as, "That's a very good question" or "I'm glad you asked that question." The audience recognizes such devices as obvious stalls. It is all right to pause briefly before responding. Dead time is seldom aired on the news, and silences obviously can't be quoted in print. If your interview is live, a short pause often will give the impression that you wish to make a thoughtful response.

Avoid saying, "Well, as I said in my speech" or "I already told you…" These responses sound as if you're insulting the reporter.

Use the reporter's first name, showing that you still feel friendly in the face of the difficult questions.

You may want to rephrase the question, giving your audience a chance to hear it in your words: "If I understand your question correctly, you're asking…"

In all cases, if you disagree with something a reporter or talk show host has said, you must counter it. If you don't, the audience can only assume that you agree.

## V. DURING THE INTERVIEW

**Get your messages across.**
Have we said that before? Here it is again. Come to an interview prepared with your messages and find opportunities to get them across without ignoring the reporter's questions. Take the initiative. You are the expert. You know what is important to tell the public - so tell them.

**Be informative, not conversational.**
News interviews are exchanges of information. You are the source of that information; the reporter represents the public. Do not feel obligated to maintain the social rules of conduct that guide conversations. Beware of the reporter who remains silent, encouraging you to ramble or dilute your original message. It's human nature to want to fill those lulls with conversation. Don't.

**Be brief.**
Reporters generally don't want lengthy, drawn-out explanations. They're looking for quotable quotes – a punchy line that will fill three lines of newsprint or 20 seconds of air time. Use your 20 seconds to get your message across – there's much more likelihood it will be used. Knowing what you want to say in advance will go a long way in simplifying your answers. Forty-five seconds is about the maximum response time for television and other media as well, unless the reporter truly wants a complete understanding of, for example, neutrino physics - in which case you may have 90 seconds.

**Don't go off the record.**
There is no such thing as off the record. An "off-the-record" comment may not be attributed to you directly, but the reporter often will use the information to confirm a story with other sources. If you don't want something to appear in print, don't say it.

**Your role as spokesperson.**
When you are conducting an interview, reporters will not distinguish between personal opinion and the business' position - and neither will the public. Answer questions appropriately. You are a spokesperson for the business - or, in some instances, for a given committee or organization – not for yourself. If you don't know the company's position on a particular issue, find out; don't speculate.

**Don't use jargon.**
Avoid using terms or acronyms that can't be quoted without explanation.
Don't say: "We're pleased that such a high percentage of workers returned their health insurance forms."
Do say: "We're pleased that so many staff intend to register for health coverage at the Acme Company."

**Say what you mean.**
Avoid bureaucratic language: "It is clear that much additional work will be required before we have a complete understanding of the issue." Instead, say, "We're working on it."

**Tell the truth.**
The truth may hurt, but lies are deadly. You probably will get caught, and reporters don't forget sources who have "burned" them. Give a direct answer when asked a direct question, even if the answer is "No," "I don't know" or "I'm sorry, I can't answer that question." You will come across as an honest, forthright person.

**Be patient.**
These are reporters, not physicists or physicians. You may have to start at the beginning to help them understand an issue.

**Don't lose your temper.**
Sometimes reporters are intentionally rude to elicit a charged response. Don't fall into the trap. Respond politely, in control at all times. Don't get into arguments - your angry comments may be reported without any mention of the provocation.

**Be friendly.**
It's an interview, not an interrogation. Establish rapport with the reporter.

**Don't answer a question with a question.**
The reporters asks, "What do you think about affirmative action?" Don't say, "What do you mean by affirmative action?" Or, "What do you think about it?" Such responses come across as evasive, pejorative or hostile.

**"No Comment."**
Don't say "No comment" or "I can neither confirm nor deny." The public views this as: "I know but I won't say." Instead, tell the reporter that you are unable to comment and, if possible, why. If a reporter asks about a document that is in draft form, for example, tell the reporter: "I'm sorry, this is a working draft, and I'll be able to comment as soon as it is becomes public." Offer to let the reporter know when the document is available.

Don't answer when you shouldn't If you know the answer to a question but can't say, don't hesitate to refer the reporter elsewhere – to the Company Public Relations Spokesperson if you're unsure where that appropriate "elsewhere" might be. Don't forget to let other offices know when you have referred a reporter.

Question: "I understand Joe Irvine is about to be appointed as a district manager. Is that true?"
Answer: "I'm sorry but I just can't answer that question for you. The appropriate office to answer all staff appointment questions is the human resource office. You should call there."

Again, don't answer questions if you are not the appropriate spokesperson. If a reporter presses, repeat your answer. Don't waver. (And don't go off the record.)

**Don't guess.**
If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. And be sure you offer to either find the answer or find someone else who knows. Don't guess, thinking the reporter will check elsewhere. There's a good chance your misinformation will appear in print.

**It's okay to make a mistake.**
The tape is rolling and you realize you've made a mistake. Or, more likely, you suddenly find you have no idea what you're saying. Stop. Say, "I'm sorry, I haven't answered your question very well. Let me back up." The reporter usually will prefer your new, crisp response.

**Talk from the public's point of view.**
Remember that you are talking through the reporter to the public. How does what you are talking about affect individuals in the community? How does it affect consumers? Say it in terms readers and viewers can relate to. If, for example, there was a toxic spill on a job site of your business, the public wouldn't care much how quickly it was cleaned up or how many workers dedicated themselves to the effort. The public wants to know whether their health is in danger.

**Cite facts.**
Reporters love facts and figures that will lend credibility to their stories or make certain points. But don't exaggerate facts by using superlatives that make things sound bigger and better than they are.

**Be prepared to repeat yourself.**
Reporters may repeat their question because your answer was too long, too complex, they didn't understand you, or they're simply trying to get a more pithy response. Welcome the question as another opportunity to state your message, perhaps more clearly.

**Be confident.**
You are the expert. You have a message to deliver. Recognize that reporters may be somewhat intimated by your expertise or position. Put them at ease.

**Respect the reporter's deadline.**
Find out their deadlines and return calls promptly. Showing respect for deadlines will go a long way toward building positive media relations. If you can't return a reporter's call, please contact an appropriate company representative to assist you.

**Don't be defensive.**
Make positive statements instead of denying or refuting comments from others. State your message; let others speak for themselves.

**Be aware of when you are being taped.**
In broadcast situations, such as in the studio or when talking to a radio reporter, it is wise to assume that everything you say is being recorded.

**Use anecdotes, humor.**
Use examples to illustrate your points. Use humor or an interesting quote. Television in particular is "show business" so entertain when appropriate.

**Avoid reading from prepared statements.**
This is especially true when you are on camera. You are the expert and ought to know what you want to say without a "script."

**Never ask a reporter to preview the story.**
Reporters generally never let sources review stories, though they often check back for scientific details. Remember, it's their job to gather the facts and tell the story accurately – to suggest they can't do so without your input insults their professionalism. It's better to listen carefully during an interview to be aware of when a reporter may not understand something. Remember – the likelihood of being misquoted is reduced substantially if you speak briefly and clearly.

## VI. IN AN EMERGENCY

Media attention during an emergency can be extremely intrusive. The public will know virtually nothing but what they are told by the press. It is imperative that the media be dealt with efficiently and effectively.

During an emergency, such as a fire or toxic spill, public information officers are called in to help staff the emergency services command post. Their job is to collect, coordinate and disseminate verified information to the news media.

It's a fact of life, however, that reporters don't just station themselves at the command post to await official information. They'll interview bystanders, seek out other administrators for comment or call faculty and students who may be involved in or affected by the emergency.

**A few things to remember during an emergency:**

Refer reporters to public information officers who are working with emergency personnel. They can contact campus police or another emergency services agencies, such as the city of Irvine Police Department, if necessary for information on contacting a command post.

Concern for people will come first to emergency personnel and should come first to all those who comment on a particular incident.

Don't deny the obvious by trying to minimize what is a serious disaster or tragedy.

Do not speculate or place blame. A reporter might tell you, "I heard the fire was caused by an explosion in your laboratory." Don't speculate on what chemicals could have started the fire; remind the reporter that they will have to get this kind of information from the command post.

Don't forget that privacy regulations apply during disasters and other incidents. For example, an employee's arrest doesn't give you freedom to discuss disciplinary actions you may have initiated against the employee in the past.

## VII. DELIVERY

The following guidelines apply primarily to those television interviews, but they will help you make the right impression for all media. The intent of these guidelines is to minimize distractions, allowing the reporter and the viewers to concentrate on what you're saying.

**Voice Projection.**
You would be surprised how much of your voice gets lost when you start talking into a microphone. Speak up. Smile when it's appropriate. Long after you have appeared on a television or radio show, people will remember you and the impression you made. That impression should be of a confident, thoughtful, caring individual.

**Personal space.**
Be prepared for a necessary closeness with a television interviewer, for the camera's sake. You may be rubbing shoulders or bumping knees with the interviewer, or talking with a microphone in your face. Don't back away.

**Gestures.**
Gestures are a means of using stress energy effectively. Don't be afraid to use them, though don't point at the reporter or camera.

If standing, keep your hands at your sides or bend your elbows slightly at your waist. Don't put your hands in your pockets, don't hold them in front of you and don't cross your arms over your chest. If you are uncomfortable with your hands at your sides, try holding a notebook or other "prop."

**Sitting.**
Sit up straight. Don't swivel or rock.

Cross your legs at the knees or sit with your legs at a 45 degree angle in the chair, legs crossed at ankles or feet together, one in front of the other.

In the television studio, don't jump out of your seat too quickly. The show's credits may be rolling over the scene of you sitting on the set. Consider yourself on camera until the show's director says you are finished.

Do not lean on the arm rest of the chair, you may look too casual. Lean forward a little, showing interest, not back, showing fear or indifference.

**Standing.**
Stand up straight. Beware of slouching and tilted shoulders. Do not rock forward and back or sway side to side.

**Head.**
Hold your head high. Don't tilt it to one side.

Beware of being an "active listener" and nodding in apparent agreement to comments with which you may not agree.

**Eyes.**
TV cameras get much closer to your face than most people. Your eye movement is critical.

Don't look at the camera. Look at the reporter 100 percent of the time. Focus on the bridge of their nose if you're uncomfortable looking into their eyes continuously. Pay attention to what's

happening or you may be embarrassed when the camera catches your eyes wandering. Don't look up at the ceiling ("God help me!") or down at the floor ("Let us pray").

Don't shift your eyes from side to side.

Wear glasses if needed. Do not wear photo greys, which turn dark when the lights hit them.

**Voice.**
When asked by a sound engineer to give a voice level, use this opportunity to "set the stage" for the interview. The engineer wants to know your voice's normal speaking level so say your name, title and what you'd like to talk about.

Beware of leaning toward and away from a stationery microphone while you're talking. This causes your voice to become louder and softer.

In a radio interview, beware of speaking in a dull monotone. Project, be expressive, and you'll come across better.

Voices sound best if they're from the lower register, yet they often get higher when people are nervous. One can lower your voice through awareness and controlled, deep breathing. Smiling helps animate the voice.

**Clothing.**
Wear clothes that are comfortable.

Solid colors or soft shades are best. A burgundy tie or scarf will reflect color onto the face. A light blue shirt or blouse, burgundy tie or scarf and navy jacket is ideal for television.

Lightweight suits are less likely to cause perspiration if you will be in the hot lights of a studio.

Make sure socks that are long enough to avoid a gap between your pant leg and the top of your sock.

Make sure your tie is straightened and your shirttail tucked in.

Button a jacket when standing; unbutton when seated.

Don't wear high contrasts like black and white. Avoid horizontal stripes, hounds-tooth and other distracting patterns.

Don't wear a pager during an interview unless you can control the sound.

**Makeup and Hair.**
Makeup is appropriate on television for men and women. It helps control shine especially on foreheads.

Before a television interview or photography session, get a haircut if you need one. Keep your hair out of your face.

**Stress.**
Most people get butterflies in their stomachs at the idea of an interview, especially one before the camera. Be aware of how you show stress and control it. Don't allow nervous gestures, such as pulling at your hair, swinging your foot or smiling too broadly, to spoil an otherwise successful interview. Nervousness vanishes with frequency. The more interviews you give, the easier they will be.

## VIII. AFTER THE INTERVIEW

**Disappointment.**
You spend hours preparing for your interview, another hour in front of the camera and you on the evening news for a grand total of six seconds. Worse, the entire story is preempted by a plane crash. Or you may spend half a day with a newspaper reporter and be quoted only once, or not at all. Don't be disappointed. Stories often are edited or "killed" for various reasons. However, the time spent helps to establish a good working relationship with the media and will benefit you in the long run. Chances are, the story will appear later or the reporter will be back.

**When will the story appear?**
Reporters are reluctant to tell you when an interview will appear, usually because they don't know. Timing is up to their editors or producers.

**Headlines.**
The story was fine, but the headline! Remember that reporters have nothing to do with headlines. Those are written by editors on the copy desk, often under great deadline and space pressures.

**Compliments.**
When a story is reported well, let the reporter know with a phone call or letter to the editor. But don't overdo it. If you're too complimentary, reporters may worry that their story wasn't balanced enough.

**Criticisms.**
Newspapers will run corrections. Minor inaccuracies or differences in viewpoint usually aren't worth making a fuss. However, serious errors and misconceptions, should be brought to a reporter's attention. Some options: Call the reporter to clear up the inaccuracy. Many reporters either will write a correction or do a follow-up piece that clarifies the information. Avoid going over the reporter's head unless the reporter is completely unresponsive. Contact the ombudsman, if the medium has one, to look into how and why errors were made. Write a letter to the editor. Be brief and to the point. If you don't edit tightly, the newspaper will do it for you.

## IX. YOU HAVE RIGHTS

**You have rights:**

- To know who is interviewing you and what newspaper, magazine, television or radio station they represent.
- To be treated courteously. The questions can be tough, but the reporter's demeanor should not be abusive.
- To physical comfort during the filming or taping of the interview–appropriate setting, chair, make-up, a glass of water.
- To not be physically threatened by hand-held lights or microphones shoved into your face.
- To make your own tape of an interview or to have someone such as a public information officer in the room during an interview. You should inform the reporter of this in advance, however, as they may choose not to conduct the interview if you insist on having a third party present.
- To ensure the security of your company and to protect it from damage from cameras or other equipment.
- To get some of your points across in the interview. Don't just answer the reporter's questions. Use your messages. Tell your story.
- To be quoted accurately.
- To protect the privacy of yourself, your employees or vendors by withholding information that is not public.
- To establish ground rules, such as time and location.
- To terminate an interview if your rights are violated.